



Committee on Finance and the Northampton City Council

*Councilor David A. Murphy, Chair
Councilor Jesse M. Adams
Councilor Maureen T. Carney
Councilor Marianne L. LaBarge*

Meeting Minutes

**Meeting Date: April 26, 2016
5:00 pm
City Council Chambers
212 Main Street
Northampton, MA 01060**

1. Meeting Called to Order: At 5:02 p.m. Councilor Murphy called the meeting to order.
2. Roll Call: Present at the meeting were: Councilors Murphy, LaBarge Adams and Carney. Also present from the City Council was Councilor Bidwell.
3. Approval of Minutes from the Previous Meeting: Councilor LaBarge moved to approve the minutes of the April 21, 2016 meeting; Councilor Carney seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 3 Yes, 0 No, 1 Abstention (Councilor Murphy).
4. 2015 Year End Audit Review: Results of Audit performed by Scanlon and Associates, LLC

Mr. Scanlon gave the committee three reports:

- FY2015 Management Letter
- FY2015 Schedule of Expenditures of Federal Awards & Independent Auditors' Reports Required Under the Single Audit Act Amendments of 1996
- Report on the Examination of Basic Financial Statements.

Also present with Mr. Scanlon was Mr. Jeff Gendron. It is planned that Mr. Gendron will transition as Lead Auditor over the next three years to provide a fresh perspective to audits performed for the City. This had been raised as a concern by the City Council when the body looked to seek a new auditor perspective during the FY 2015 audit season. Mr. Scanlon explained that another staff member who recently became a CPA will be more involved on the tax end of the audit process. As partner of the firm, Mr. Scanlon will still be involved to some degree.

Mr. Scanlon reviewed the Basic Financial Statements. He reminded the committee that the main purpose of an audit is to express an opinion about the City's financial statements in accordance with "GAAP", that is, Generally Accepted Accounting Principles. The purpose is not to find fraud, but fraud is considered when the procedures are designed for audits. Risk assessment is considered; the auditors also assess materiality, which is determining the relevance of the information provided.

Pages 3 – 4 of the Report on the Examination of Basic Financial Statements contain the unmodified opinion of the auditor. This is the preferred opinion as bonding companies look at this when determining the City's bond rating. Mr. Scanlon reviewed the Statement of Net Position and the Statement of Activities with the Committee. In 2013 the City adopted a Compensated Absence Reserve as a liability. These help fund buy backs of time (vacation, sick, etc.) when employees leave City employment. The current Compensated Absence (less than one year) is at \$1,340,156 and the noncurrent is at \$2,426,907. This is the first year that the City has included

the Net Pension Liability on its balance sheet. While it has always existed, this liability has never been disclosed on the Balance Sheet. GASB 68 looks to improve the financial accounting and reporting of pension liabilities. The City is now on a funding schedule to fund the entire retirement system in 2036; right now they City is on a pay-as-you-go system. Another liability is OPEB (other post-employment benefits), which includes health insurance given to retired employees. The City did adopt an OPEB Trust; in FY2015 the city added \$100,000 to this trust; in FY2016 the City added \$125,000 and is budgeting to add \$160,000 in FY2017. OPEB requires municipal governments to think long term given the significant amount of the liability (\$38 million for Northampton). Mr. Scanlon advised that there are changes coming to the OPEB standard that will take effect in the year 2018. Once the City reaches the \$10 million mark, any employee retiring after that point will be paid retirement benefits from the trust. Finance Director Susan Wright noted that once the City fully funds the retirement system (in 2036), appropriations that would have gone into the retirement system will be put toward the OPEB trust fund. Mr. Scanlon noted that since the City is making a long term commitment to its employees, it is important to have this commitment be funded. Because of this commitment, the Net Position shows a deficit of \$65,196,969 under "Unrestricted"; this is usually a bad sign, however, what is attributing to this are the two long term liabilities for the Net Pension Liability and the OPEB Obligation. In the year 2036 this deficit will decrease and will get the net position back to zero. Regarding the Net Pension Liability, this liability went down because the projection on the investment income for the retirement fund was exceeded. This shows up on the Balance Sheet as "Deferred Inflow Related to Pensions" and totals \$3,719,909.

Mr. Scanlon reviewed the City's Statement of Activities (page 18). The Net Position change from the beginning of the Fiscal Year to the end of the Fiscal Year is approx \$3.8 million, a bulk of which is the Net Pension Liability going down. Under Capital Grants & Contributions, the \$4,813,036 represents Chapter 90 grant that gets awarded to the City every year. Also, there was a \$3 million grant for the 3-County Fairgrounds that was received in June for drainage at that location. The City did not spend the money for this project until FY2016.

Pages 19 & 20 show more traditional balance sheets that governments will use to make decisions. Mr. Scanlon noted that the General Fund Unassigned is at \$10,140,194.00, which typically is defined as "free cash" and stabilization funds. The City's "free cash" was certified by the DOR as \$3.4 million and the stabilization funds were \$5.2 million. This is different than what is showing on the balance sheets because of the "overlay"--the way the state calculates "free cash" is a more conservative approach. Bonding companies look at the Unassigned balance and how this relates to the overall expenditures. The City's Unassigned is roughly about 11% of the overall expenditures. Bonding companies will give a higher rating when the ratio between unassigned cash and expenditures is above 10%. The City's bond rating is AA. To get to the AAA rating there are four factors that Bonding companies look at: Management, Reserves, Liquidity, and Planning and Existing Policies; the City would need to be at the 15% ratio in order to be considered for a AAA rating.

Director Wright quoted from an e-mail from Hilltop Securities about the City's potential to become a AAA rated municipality. "The biggest factor holding the City back from AAA rating is economic indicators. Regular reports to the City Council on budgets to actual would strengthen the City's Management score. The only way to address economic indices is to beef up reserves." The City was provided a list of municipalities with a AAA rating. Director Wright will follow up with the Mayor to have the e-mail directed to the City Council.

Mr. Scanlon explained that non-major funds are grants, capital projects; one of the major reasons for the increase by \$6 million is because of the grant received by the City for a drainage project at the 3-County Fairgrounds location. The City received the funds in FY2015 but did not begin to spend the money until FY2016. In the Non-Major Funds, Mr. Scanlon pointed out that in FY2015 there was a new stormwater fund. Those monies are accounted for in the Non-Major Fund line item. Many of the major funds are broken out on pages 71-73 of the financial statement book. The City could look to re-classify the stormwater funds to a Business-Type activity if desired.

Councilor LaBarge asked about the Septic Repair Loan Repayment line item. Mr. Scanlon explained that the program is no longer in place, however, at one point in time the City offered money to residents to re-do septic systems. The City received the money from the Water System Abatement Trust. The money was made available to residents via a loan from CDBG; once the money was re-paid, the City would pay back the Water System Abatement Trust. Director Wright explained that there is only one loan that is outstanding under this program. (The program was available in the late 90's.) A lien on the property would be filed if the loan was not repaid.

The Committee looked at the Budget vs. Actual summary for the General Fund (page 23). The first column shows the Amounts Carried Forward from the Prior Year (encumbrances). The worksheet shows that the City is using approx. \$3.4 million in "free cash" to fund the budget, however, it is generating \$3.3 million in "free cash" at the end of the year. This is something that the bond companies will look at. If a municipality were to take \$2.0 million per year to fund operations and then see no "free cash" at the end of the year, then eventually the "free cash" fund balance would be depleted. Mr. Scanlon noted that the City has a nice blend of how its "free cash" is generated; \$1.5 million from revenues in several categories, including excise tax, hotel/motel room tax, charges for services, etc. Mr. Scanlon noted that the City has very conservative fiscal policies that are sound. Some of the "free cash" is generated from expenditures, and again this is a blend of several categories in which the free cash is derived. Mr. Scanlon pointed out that it is not only important to know how you are generating free cash, but also how you are using it. He believes that Northampton Management has a good understanding about how free cash works. Councilor Murphy recalled that in 2010 the city had a revenue deficit when the State decided to change the amount that they would provide to the City.

Director Wright noted that the City was at one time taking Veteran's Benefits, Fire Dept. overtime, Legal expenses, and Snow and Ice expenses out of free cash. These amounts are now part of the standard budget and are no longer paid for out of free cash.

On page 75, the number one source of revenue is property taxes. The City's collection rate is 96.997% which shows that the Collector is doing a good job. Mr. Scanlon pointed out that "Prior Years" personal property is \$437,705 (uncollected) and should be taken care of through the abatement process. In the prior years, the City used this to balance the budget, so the City will need to take care of this at some point. A lot of the properties in this category are businesses that don't exist anymore, so the money is probably uncollectable. Even so, the City needs to go through the abatement process to clean this up.

Councilor LaBarge asked about the Custodial Credit Risks identified on page 41. Mr. Scanlon explained that there is a certain risk in putting all of your money in one bank account. This information is provided to show what the potential risk would be if a bank were to close and the monies were not federally insured.

Mr. Scanlon provided a brief overview of the report on the Schedule of Expenditures of Federal Awards and Independent Auditors' Reports Required Under the Single Audit Act Amendments of 1996. He noted that the City receives about \$3.3 million in Federal expenditures. As a result a separate audit of those funds needs to be conducted. This is required when you spend over ½ million dollars. Fifty percent of the Federal Expenditures need to be tested as part of this audit. The grants that met the criteria are: School SPED grant, Title I Grant and CDBG. These are the three grants that were tested. There was only one compliance issue found with Title I and Special Education Grants regarding time allocations at Smith Vocational and Agricultural High School. When an employee works under a grant, the employee must submit a signed timesheet by the employee and countersigned by an administrator or supervisor. During FY 2015 the SVAHS did not obtain the required time and effort certifications which could have resulted in some employees' salaries being inappropriately charged to Federal programs. The deficiency was caused by turnover in personnel who were administering the federal grant programs. New personnel were not aware of the requirements.

The auditing firm plans and performs the audit of the basic financial statements and when they raise a concern, the concern is categorized as a “deficiency”, a “material weakness” or “other matter”.

Mr. Scanlon advised the City that a New OMB Circular was release in December 2013 providing new guidance on administrative requirements, cost principles, and audit requirements for federal awards. The new guidance will be in effect for all federal awards or funding entities on or after December 26, 2016 and will apply to non federal entity audits for fiscal years beginning on or after that date. Mr. Scanlon advises that City personnel familiarize themselves with the new guidance.

Another recommendation made by Scanlon & Associates, LLC was that the City consider maintaining an inventory on materials and supplies (those items not accounted for under capital assets). This particular concern is for larger departments, like DPW, Police Dept., Fire Dept., etc.

The City was fined \$14,495 due to a late payment to the IRS. City Treasurer/Collector Kris Bissell explained that the payment was set up through Florence Savings bank and required two steps in order to complete the transaction. Only one step was completed which resulted in a 14-day late submission; department procedures have been modified to prevent this problem in the future.

The Auditing firm suggested that surety bonds for the Treasurer/Collector be increased. Director Wright reports that this will be addressed when the surety bonds are renewed.

Mr. Scanlon reviewed the concerns of previous years: all of the matters identified by the firm during the last audit have been addressed.

Mr. Scanlon suggested that the auditing firm meet with the Finance personnel beginning in August before the next audit is scheduled to begin. The meeting could potentially be followed up with the Council (committee) to understand if there are areas of concern that the Council would like to see addressed. Councilor Murphy suggested September would be best given vacation schedules, etc.

Director Wright suggested that it might be helpful to show the Council what is done during an audit, and to hear the kind of testing that is done during an audit. There is a certain level of detail that is done during an audit that might be helpful for the Council to know.

5. New Business: None
6. Adjourn: At 6:00 p.m. Councilor Carney moved to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Adams seconded the motion. The motion was approved on a voice vote of 4 Yes, 0 No.

Prepared by:

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